

Training and Retaining Special Education Teachers:

A Collaborative Effort between Universities and the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) Program

By

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New Support and Training for Special Education Teachers

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) and the California Department of Education are in the process of collaborating with the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Programs (BTSA) in California to make them more consistent with the CCTC requirements for the Level II special education credentials. Currently in place is a two-part credentialing program that ensures the quality of special education teachers in California. The first part of the program, Level I, is designed to be completed within a single year. This level provides the foundational preparation that special education teachers need. In many cases, even before they complete this level, teachers can gain employment. The Level II training, which is university based, addresses the remaining critical areas of highly specialized knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to deliver effective special education services. In addition to completing Level II course work, special education teachers now need to develop an individual induction plan within 120 days of their employment. This plan requires a new special education teacher to receive guidance and support from an experienced, credentialed special educator for one year. This new credentialing structure puts more “teeth” into the requirement that districts provide mentor support for new teachers, and also emphasizes the importance of a special education teacher receiving that guidance from an instructor with a similar credential: an experienced teacher of the deaf and hard-of-hearing guides a new teacher who will be working with similar students; an experienced teacher of students with mild-to-moderate disabilities guides a new teacher working in that area, and so forth.

BTSA, which has long been a program of support for new teachers in California, has had a general education focus. The program uses thirteen *BTSA Program Standards*, a set of statements that identifies the best practices for supporting new teachers, as a guide for all BTSA programs. A key feature of these practices

is a paid support provider, an experienced teacher who receives training that prepares him/her to guide new teachers through the first two years of teaching. Additional support opportunities for new teachers include visits to other classrooms as well as workshops and seminars related to beginning teacher needs. BTSA's structure throughout the state allows it to pull from groups of seasoned teachers who represent a wide range of expertise, making possible this effort to match the focus of the new teachers' credentials. Table I below highlights both the commonalities and the potential conflicts between key features of BTSA and Level II Education Specialist programs.

Table I: Comparison of Features of Level II and BTSA Program

Program Feature	Level II Credential	BTSA
Goal	Completion of required credential standards and new teacher support and assistance to improve teaching practices and increase teacher retention	New teacher support and assistance to improve teaching practices and increase teacher retention
Teachers served	All special education teachers with Level I credentials regardless of prior teaching experience	All first- and second-year credentialed teachers working under their first California credential (including Out-of-State Teachers)
Personnel	University faculty and district support provider (who must hold a special education credential)	District support provider
Support provider pay	No provision made by state for paying support provider	State funds provided for support provider pay
Structure	University-based program requiring both coursework and an IIP	District-based formative assessment process including an IIP
Time requirements	A minimum of two and not more than five years to complete the Level II credential; only one year of support provider assistance required	Two years of BTSA support provider assistance
Research base	Validated teaching practices with special education students	Validated teaching practices with general education students

BTSA in the past has also provided an assessment component to support the development of new teachers, usually using the *California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers (CFASST)*. From 1998–2001, *CFASST* was used throughout the majority of BTSA programs as a part of a field review process. Evaluation data was collected from CFASST trainers, BTSA directors, support providers, and beginning teachers. This data has been utilized to develop the *CFASST 1.0* formative assessment system beginning with the 2001–2002 school year.

Over the past two to three years, it has become apparent that modifications to BTSA would be necessary if BTSA is to address the needs of new special education teachers. Throughout the state, partnerships are developing among universities, school districts, and BTSA personnel to coordinate new-teacher training and support services. Some are developing common induction plans and delineating good teaching practices appropriate for various special education settings. Others are providing narrative interpretations of the elements of California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP). And still others are designing guides to support new special education teachers in preparing for and conducting IEPs (Individualized Education Programs).

Building on these grass roots efforts, additional focused attention is now being given to the unique needs of the new special education instructor. A CFASST for Special Education Advisory Panel has emerged, consisting of 30 educators from university and BTSA programs, as well as members of special education focus groups. The panel has worked to design and launch a pilot of *CFASST for Special Education Teachers*, a document that provides adaptations for special education teachers who are in their first year of teaching. This fall, over 40 BTSA programs, working with approximately 1,000 new special education teachers, are helping to pilot the modified CFASST program. Two August workshops were designed to prepare the pilot sites to implement and formatively evaluate the CFASST adaptations during the 2001–2002 school year. Based on feedback from these pilot sites, the *CFASST for Special Education* materials will be revised and made available for use statewide. The information developed through this process will also become available to general education support providers to assist general education teachers in responding to the needs of the special education students in their classrooms.

These and other proposed modifications in BTSA programs are designed to make BTSA more responsive to Level II credential requirements in general, and to the unique needs and challenges of the special education teaching contexts in particular. These combined efforts provide a model of interagency collaboration and represent a huge step toward providing meaningful Level II support to new special education teachers.

A Special Education Focus Group, supported by the California Department of Education, Special Education Division, is offering a formal training to prepare professors in institutions of higher education and members of district BTSA programs to work collaboratively in implementing an integrated model of new teacher support. This effort is funded in part by California's State Improvement Grant. This training, offered on February 1, 2002, at the Hanalei Hotel in San Diego, is designed to prepare university professors and personnel in district BTSA programs to work collaboratively in implementing an integrated model of new teacher support.

Workshop: “Opening Doors: BTSA for Special Educators”
Date: February 1, 2002–9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.
Location: San Diego, CA
Who should attend: University personnel. Chairs of Special Education Departments at Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) and professors with responsibilities for the “individual induction plans”, Level II Education Specialist credential. Limit of two professors per IHE due to conference limit of one hundred. One night lodging and travel reimbursement will be offered to the eligible guests.

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